

WHO KILLED BARRY SEAL?

An Investigative Obituary



Adler Berriman "Barry" Seal, the 45-year-old ex-Green Beret dope pilot whose snitch testimony was crucial to several of the Justice Department's biggest-ever international narcotics cases, was blown away like a Penny Arcade shooting-gallery duck last spring, after a Louisiana federal judge had sentenced him to perform six months "community service" in a Baton Rouge drug-treatment center. Adler was machine-gunned to death in the parking lot of the Salvation Army Community Treatment Center in Baton Rouge by two men who appear to have been professional Colombian dope mafiosi—just days before the April 1986 issue of *HIGH TIMES* was due to appear, with a partial account of Seal's colorful confidential-informant career in it. ("Sandinistas, Victimizers or Victims?" by Joel Millman.)

Seal, by his own proud admission, had flown countless tons of cocaine from Colombia into the United States in the late '70s before falling to a federal conspiracy indictment in 1983, involving conspiracy to distribute bootleg Quaaludes. He pulled a ten-year sentence for that one, and opted to work it off by doing confidential-informant undercover work for the Drug Enforcement Administration. In this role, he was possibly the most hard working and foolhardy spook-snitch who ever orchestrated "conspiracies" for any dope agency. Among other things, he functioned as a dope pilot for mobsters close to the Big Three of Caribbean dope-smuggling: Pablo Escobar, Juan Ochoa and Carlos Lehder, who became so powerful in Colombia with dope money that the Bogota government chased them out of the country in early 1985. After the Big Three resumed operations as usual out of Panama, Barry Seal continued flying dope planes for their outfit in his role as a DEA superspook, and at one point, claimed to have photographed the deputy defense minister of Nicaragua in personal company with Juan Escobar himself and a

big load of cocaine at a bush strip somewhere around Managua. The Reagan Administration picked up on Seal's stories in a big way, and has relied on them as the primary "evidence" supporting their charges that the left-wing Sandinistas run most of the dope in the Caribbean in exchange for gun money.

Subsequently, Seal was the snitch who enticed the prime minister of the Turks and Caicos Islands, Norman Saunders, to come to Miami to wash some imaginary cocaine money; when Saunders went to U.S. federal prison for conspiracy to traffic in dope, it was almost exclusively on the basis of ABSCAM-style videotapes

of Barry Seal suckering him into the imaginary deal.

From Sole Witness...

Finally last winter, Juan Ochoa of the Big Three got himself busted in Spain on a false-identification charge. As soon as he was in jail there, the United States brought extradition proceedings against Escobar, swearing they could prove that he was involved in running numerous Nicaraguan cocaine labs which pump coke into the U.S. Their witness against Ochoa, of course, was none other than Barry Seal.

So Seal was a very important individual for the U.S. Government last spring. Unfortunately, during all the time he'd been snitching for the DEA, Seal had not resisted the temptation to use his privileged status to engage in criminal enormities behind the dope agency's back. In 1984 he got himself convicted in Louisiana on charges involving 200 kilos of cocaine and a list of money laundering charges; and although the feds did their best to mitigate the wrath of the judge against Seal, feelings were obviously strained between the superspook and his federal handlers.

In fact, on one of his last missions to Nicaragua, Seal's DEA-supplied dope plane was shot up by the Sandinista army in Managua. After that mishap, Seal switched his allegiance to the Central Intelligence Agency which complicated matters infernally; the CIA is known to help "friendly" guerilla forces like the Nicaraguan Contras to move dope for gun money, although the DEA fiercely repudiates that sort of thing.

...To Clay Pigeon

Meanwhile, all this time, Seal was on trial in Baton Rouge for Quaaludes and moneywashing. The judge, Frank Polozola of the Middle District of Louisiana, ultimately fed Seal a very peculiar sentence. The sentence on the dope charge was suspended entirely, in view of Seal's terrific work for the feds', but for the moneywashing charge, Polozola fed Seal six months of "community service" at the Salvation Army dope-rehab center.

Thus, Seal was obliged to spend his nights, each weeknight, at the same public address, leaving it and entering it at precisely-determined times of day. The judge moreover forbade Seal to enlist any bodyguards for his protection, reasoning that if Seal had armed men around him, and those men and their guns were under his control, then he would necessarily be in "constructive custody of weapons"—a violation of parole.

Diane O'Connor, chief of the corrections facility at the Salvation Army, recalls that Barry Seal was a quite engaging detox-and-rehab client, amusing all the other inmates greatly with his jovial good nature. Still, his attitude was refractory, it seems: "I can't believe I'm here," she recalled (after his murder) him saying: "I don't understand the purpose of being here."

● Did the CIA bump off the DEA's most important dope trial witness? ●

Speculation abounds, naturally, in dope-trade and spook-craft circles everywhere as to the real purpose of making Barry Seal such a prime clay pigeon. Conspiracy buffs point out how Seal so nimbly switched his allegiance from the DEA to the CIA after the Managua airplane shootup. Some have suggested that Seal was *really* aligning himself with the CIA as a confidential informant so as to get a line into all the dope being run out of Central America by the Contras and other "liberation" groups armed and funded by the CIA; and that once he had compiled enough evidence of dope crime among the CIA's customers, he'd revert to the DEA and spill all the beans as their witness. "So maybe it was the CIA who had him bumped off, when they got wind of the plot," conspiracy freaks are speculating.

Tawdry Rubout?

This scenario is belied by the circumstances of Seal's assassination, however, which fit the precise profile of a formal South American mob execution. On the evening of the hit, Seal had pulled his bone-white Fleetwood Cadillac into the parking lot of the Salvation Army halfway house off Airline Highway, as usual, at 6 P.M. on the dot, as per the judge's instructions. Two dark-complexioned men who had obviously been waiting for six o'clock pulled out machineguns and riddled him to death right there in the front seat, then hopped into a grey Buick and tore off. Subsequently they switched cars to a red Buick some miles away, leaving the getaway vehicle on Maribel Street with a Mac-10 and an Uzi inside it. This is the classic m.o. of a Colombian dope rubout, not of a clandestine CIA spook snuff, nearly every-one agrees.

Suspicion that the rubout may have been merely staged by the CIA to *look* like a Colombian dope hit were ventilated within 12 hours of the slaying, when three Colombian nationals were taken into custody separately around the

Baton Rouge area. One was busted in his hotel, another at the airport, and another in a cab. The cab bust *was* peculiar, however. Suspected shooter Miguel Velez, 37, of Medellin in Colombia (site of the Big Three's operational headquarters there) was a passenger in a cab that was wrecked when it hit a deer at 2:30 A.M. the morning after the hit, on Interstate 59, after the cab had been the subject of an all-points-bulletin on police shortwave for some hours. Presumably the public's curiosity on this point will be satisfied at the trial of the three Colombians—unless they elect to plead guilty to murder charges in Louisiana, which is unlikely, and go silently to jail forever.

Of course, conspiracy freaks know no bounds to speculation. "It was the *judge* who got the guy killed," many will point out, reasonably enough: "He kissed Seal goodbye forever when he sent him to that public detox center, hung him out in the wind. The guy was lucky to get through the seven weeks he lived there before they offed him. So who's this *judge* in bed with?" Louisiana, they will point out, is almost certainly the single state in the nation with the highest volume of dope moving through it from South America, and most of the dope is simply never intercepted by Louisiana authorities.

However, a less provocative scenario is supported by statements of United States Attorney Stanford Bardwell, who prosecuted Seal's case—even though he and Seal had been friends back in high school together in Louisiana. Bardwell says that Seal was offered no end of opportunities to join the Federal Marshal's Witness-Protection Program, and live under an assumed name in inconspicuously modest circumstances somewhere far away from his beloved South. Seal could never have tolerated that, says Bardwell, and refused all such offers of protection: "He would have had to maintain a low profile and change his working habits, and I don't think he was willing to do that."

In "real" life, when he wasn't running dope or guns or whatever for U.S. security agencies, Seal ran a company that remodeled airplanes and sold them to businessmen—and probably to dope movers—for a very respectable profit. He was the sole source of income for numerous relatives, whom he supported in generous comfort. He was engaging, happy-go-lucky, and just generally an irresistible character—the best possible sort of personality for someone who acts out a rich fantasy life by suckering people into dope deals, and then turning them over to the police. All in all, one of the great American characters.

Now that he's been murdered, however, the United States Government has lost its prime witness against the alleged "doperunners" of Marxist Nicaragua, and—even more significant—a great deal of their case against the Big Three of Medellin, including Juan Ochoa, who is expected to be shifted from Spain to U.S. custody very shortly, to stand trial. All in all, it would really seem that the likeliest culprits behind the Barry Seal snuff were the Colombian dope movers. ●

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